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# Print Activism and Translating African Literature: Conversations at Writivism 2016

Ruth Bush, Madhu Krishnan and Kate Wallis

During the last week of August 2016, the inaugural Arts Management and Literary Entrepreneurship workshop was held as part of the Writivism festival. Writivism is one of East Africa's leading annual literary events, now in its fifth year. The workshop, convened by the authors of this piece, came into being as part of an ongoing collaboration between the University of Bristol, Stellenbosch University and the Center for African Cultural Excellence (CACE). The previous April, following on from a workshop we had hosted at University of Bristol focused on African and African diaspora publishing, we began a conversation with Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire, co-founder of the CACE, about ways of better drawing attention to and supporting the infrastructure that makes possible the production and consumption of African literature. Bwa Mwesigire set up Kampala-based CACE with Kyomuhendo Ateenyi and Naseemah Mohamed in 2012, and Writivism—their flagship project—was founded to promote African literature on the continent itself through workshops, literary prizes and an annual festival. However, as bwa Mwesigire explained, the majority of Writivism's programming until this point had been driven by the needs of writers. CACE was now eager to put the producers of

African cultural production and its institutions—from publishers to bloggers to festival managers—more firmly at the centre of their work. In collaboration with Dr Grace Musila at Stellenbosch University in South Africa he had been developing ideas for a workshop targeting the needs of early career arts managers and literary entrepreneurs that could form part of Writivism's annual festival in August, and he asked us if we would be open to collaborating with them to facilitate the inaugural edition.

At the time we were in the final stages of work on a special issue of *Wasafiri* that took the fiftieth anniversary of New Beacon Books, the UK's first black bookshop and publishing house, as a spark to explore activist print cultures in Africa and African diaspora publishing. This special issue draws attention to print's ongoing potential to build solidarity across borders and between generations. For each of us, in different ways, our research has been concerned with the role of literary institutions and enterprises—both on the African continent and in Europe and North America—in the development of African culture, writ large. Our findings have drawn attention to the agonistic relationship between African literary producers and global literary infrastructure, a relationship which at times reinforces the colonialist metropole/periphery binary, and the need for more autonomous, local and continentally based enterprises. Bwa Mwesigire's suggestion spoke to a way of better entering into dialogue with the practical concerns of building and supporting new literary institutions and enterprises, and we eagerly accepted his offer.

Working with bwa Mwesigire and Musila, we developed a four-day workshop, which in its first incarnation brought together close to 40 literary professionals from twelve Anglophone and Francophone African countries in Kampala. The workshop combined academic and practical approaches with each day focusing on ways of setting up, thinking about and sustaining a different kind of literary initiative. Across its four days, participants moved through organising a literary festival to managing a literary prize to publishing literary translations to running a book distribution initiative. The session on literary translation resonated strongly with the

ethics of print activism raised by our special issue of *Wasafiri* and we expand upon this below.

### **Publishing Literary Translations**

The workshop took a broad structure across its four days: running for three hours in the afternoon, each session began with an exploratory discussion or exercise led by the day's moderator; this was followed by presentations from successful practitioners already working in the field and an opportunity for a Q&A with these experts; the session then finished with a practical exercise where participants worked in small groups to develop ideas, timelines and budgets for a new literary initiative, supported by the moderators and expert practitioners, and were then asked to present these back to the larger group. Although the workshop was predominantly run in English, we had encouraged applications from French-speakers and were provided with an interpreter by the local Alliance Française; we also circulated printed course materials in English and French in advance of the workshop. Ruth Bush moderated the session on literary translation and we invited three speakers to share their experiences of working on translation projects: Edwige-Renée Dro (of the then newly formed Côte d'Ivoire-based literary collective AbidjanLit), Felwine Sarr (co-founder of Senegal-based publishing house Editions Jimsaan) and Moses Kilolo (Managing Editor of Pan-African writers' collective Jalada). All three spoke eloquently about their experiences of publishing writing across languages and offered critical reflections on the aesthetics, practicalities and driving forces behind the different initiatives they've been involved in; all three, too, firmly advocated a form of activism around translation projects that would develop much needed affiliations and alliances beyond the artificial boundaries imposed by European colonization. Here we wanted to take the opportunity to share some of the important arguments made through the session and the questions these raised for us.

Edwige-Renée Dro is an Ivorian writer and literary translator who has worked for a substantial portion of her career in the United Kingdom. Her intervention drew on experiences of taking part in a variety of projects that in her words "seek

to bridge the gap" between Anglophone and Francophone Africa, from Jalada's *Language and Translation* issues to the last two editions of the Writivism festival. However, she chose to focus not only on the practicalities of this work, but also on why projects of this kind are vital for African culture and society today. In ways that echo New Beacon's commitment to the potential of print to build solidarity across borders and between generations as a means of confronting social injustice, Dro made the case that, "In Africa, translating our work is of vital importance because it connects us to one another and, through that, we get to know each other." She valorized the work of translators—in particular referencing translations of the works of Ahmadou Kourouma, Camara Laye and Chinua Achebe—in helping to connect the shared experiences of African readers across different contexts and geographies. And yet, she didn't hesitate to foreground the ongoing challenges faced in carrying out this work, from the literary awards that celebrate African writing yet are only genuinely representative of *anglophone* African writing, to the financial imperatives that prevent more translations being commissioned, and to larger patterns of consumption and production which define and delineate which languages come to the fore. She also shared personal anecdotes highlighting the ways in which even when conversations about translation are pursued, the role of the translator within this process is often systemically devalued. Her talk ended with a powerful call to activism, committing herself to translating at least two African novels into either English or French "in order to carry on with that work of building connections that was started in the sixties and the seventies," and asking for commitments from other literary institutions and individuals towards this work.

Felwine Sarr is a Senegalese academic and writer. With a background in economics, his most recent book, *Afrotopia*, argues for the intimate connection between how Africa is conceptualized by African intellectuals and the continent's economic and social futures. Sarr co-founded Editions Jimsaan with Boubacar Boris Diop and Nafissatou Dia Diouf in 2012, and they also run the Athéna bookshop in Dakar. Like Dro, Sarr's presentation made a case for the importance

of translation in breaking down borders and its role in the ongoing process of creating an idea of Africa as place. He talked about feeling “at home” reading African literature in translation and how reading in translation not only reflects and allows diversity but simultaneously reflects and allows cultural unity. However, within this he emphasized culture as a dynamic ongoing process with new forms of expression, questions and human experiences, which shift across time and regions. Translation plays a crucial role in helping us to understand and express this, and in particular translating African stories into African languages also helps to deepen or enrich sensibility. With that in mind, he drew attention to the work of Editions Jimsaan co-founder, the novelist Boubacar Boris Diop, in setting up the Céytu imprint which publishes major works of francophone literature (not just from Africa) in Wolof translation. Sarr also highlighted some of the practical challenges of this work of literary translation emphasising that it is not just about technical skill but about the cultural context of the text and leaving us with a series of provocative questions: How do you translate the aesthetics of an author? How do you translate broken French of Kourouma? How do you translate the untranslatable?

Moses Kilolo is the Kenya-based Managing Editor of Jalada—a writers’ collective formed in 2013 following a workshop run by Kwani Trust and Granta. He was the driving force behind Jalada’s *Translation Issue*, which in 2016 published Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s short story “The Upright Revolution,” originally written in Gikuyu and translated into over 30 African languages. As Kilolo emphasised, bringing this project together was in itself an activist commitment to the importance of translation, and in particular of translation from and into African languages. His talk therefore focused on the practicalities of conceptualizing and commissioning this publication. He explained that the issue was built around a story written by Ngũgĩ because Jalada was eager to make sure this was a translation project that didn’t ignore what had gone before but instead “acknowledged and amplified” those legacies. When it came to commissioning translations, instead of putting out a public call, Jalada drew on existing networks across the continent—including Writivism—to begin

conversations. This strategy was partly to ensure decisions about translations into multiple languages (which in most cases the editorial team at Jalada didn’t speak) were being made on the basis of recommendations and partly because, without any funding, the project needed to operate through an informal movement rather than a formal commissioning process. Kilolo highlighted that Dro was, “one of the people that stood with us” and the project was consistently informed by her experience as a translator. Kilolo was also able to give an insight into the many challenges faced, one of the most significant being that professional translators were very often not available to work with in the African languages they wanted to have represented and so many translations were crafted by new translators who were passionate about their own language but who may not have even seen a literary text published in that language before. If finding translators was hard, getting translations commissioned on good-will, delivered to deadline and then sourcing qualified editors and proofreaders was even harder. And yet for Kilolo it was the connections built across the continent and the sheer number

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of people that volunteered their time to make the issue possible that was “transformative.” The next step planned by Jalada is to print and publish individual translations in the places where that language is read. However, while Jalada’s publication of the *Translation Issue* was covered by mainstream media outlets in the UK, France and India, as Kilolo informed us, no Kenyan newspapers ran the story. His intervention therefore closed by making the case that in order to “grow our work” this work needs to be valued at home—bringing us very much back to bwa Mwesigye and Writivism’s drivers for the workshop and the need to build the structures through which African cultural production is produced and valued on the continent.

### Conclusions

What all three of these presentations, and the conversations they provoked through the workshop, brought into view was that while among these literary professionals there is an active commitment to and strong sense of the need and value of the work of literary translation in the production of African literature, this is not supported by the necessary infrastructure to facilitate and economically support these endeavours. Projects like Jalada’s *Translation Issue* or Cassava Republic Press’s *Valentine’s Day Anthology* are pioneering and not only enable but draw attention to the sheer possibilities of translating African literature into African languages. However, both were produced out of collaborative—not financial—relationships and emphasise building readerships in African languages by making this work available for free. And if this work continues to only be able to be done for free, how will that impact the ways in which literary translation as a craft is valued and funded?

As an opening activity at the workshop, Ruth shared three anonymised translations of a paragraph from Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* (*Allah is not obliged*) and asked participants to comment on which they preferred. In Kampala, there was a notable preference for the translation that had been produced not by a professional literary translator but by Google Translate, much to our surprise. When we explored the reasons for this, the most compelling was a

feeling that the other translations had polished Kourouma’s carefully crafted narrative voice too far for the readership some participants had in mind. This preference for Google Translate—albeit anecdotal rather than a sustained piece of research—threw up a host of questions and ethical dilemmas, not least given that all of those present at the workshop in Kampala also claimed that literary translators were invisible in the African literary landscape. This seems to suggest that beyond the theoretical invisibility of the translator, there is a more pressing question of training and mentoring translators, and valorising that craft as literature.

As part of the workshop’s closing activities, we asked participants to complete a short evaluation questionnaire, listing their motivations for attending, their hopes and aims as literary practitioners, and any insights developed over the course of the four days. We were struck by how many of these questionnaires specifically cited the translation session. Based on the results of the evaluations, a clear sense emerged that participants sought insights around the practicalities, processes and structures needed to enable literary translations. Equally, participants highlighted their desire to develop new ideas for translating to and from African languages and not merely across European idioms. Reflecting both on the workshop itself and the feedback received from the participants, we cannot help but recall an important point made by Felwine Sarr during the session, which emphasised that translation—like all forms of literary activism on the continent—must be thought of as an iterative process. Rather than wait for the appearance of established structures and methodologies, he urged the workshop participants to simply start working, arguing that if we do not take the initiative and begin to act, nothing will ever happen. This is why Dro’s call for concrete commitments is important. Equally important is thinking about structures which can be put in place to support these those commitments, and the ways in which the activist potential of language and translation on the African continent, oriented towards Africa and Africans themselves, is such a vital task. Heeding these calls, we have continued our work with CACE, working towards a second edition of the workshop at the Writivism festival this year and

establishing a mentoring programme for participants. One of the aims of the mentoring programme is to focus not only on the craft of translation, but the structures through which it may become economically-viable, both for translators and for the producers of African writing (publishers, bloggers, book distributors, and writers themselves). We hope that this will become a portable and sustainable model to share with other partners, and are actively searching for collaborators interested in being part of this work supporting literary activism, structures and institutions on the African continent.

## The IOW Interview: Roma Backhouse

### Marta Dziuros

Roma Backhouse joined Free Word as its Director in September 2016. Her career has spanned various sectors of the arts, including literature, and she says that her job is to make creative things happen—while exploring how art influences society. She founded the Bloomsbury Festival in 2006 out of a need to open doors, physically and metaphorically. She says of that time, “connections were made, ideas were explored, people co-existed in ways that they didn’t during the rest of the year.” Her appreciation of the ways in which creativity and social engagement can interweave extends to Free Word: “it isn’t just an arts organisation or a free expression organisation; it’s an organisation where the creative and the social co-exist, and can make each other stronger.” The collaborative aspect of Free Word’s network of resident and associate organisations and the potential this collaboration has are also important to Backhouse, especially at a time when, she says, many of the values and disciplines she holds dear are under threat.

IOW — What has been the most exciting aspect of taking over the helm of Free Word from its previous director, Rose Fenton?

RB — Rose was amazing at building relationships—the most exciting thing has been my unfolding realisation of how many incredible individuals and organisations are involved with Free Word. The network Rose has built around Free Word